

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Twenty nineteen is here, and with it come many challenges and questions ahead for the distance learning educator to ponder, to resolve, to understand, to consider. I wish you a great year in all things related to teaching online, and I'll be here to help with your questions, offering suggestions that I hope can make the experience of teaching in your online château just a bit easier and less stressful. Remember: please send in your questions for the next issue to

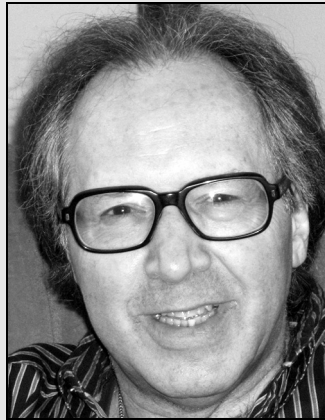
errol@distance-learning@gmail.com I'll do my best to help you!

Meanwhile, here are the questions I selected for this issue, along with my responses ...

MAKING EXTRA EFFORTS IN THE CLASSROOM KNOWN TO A SUPERVISOR

Errol, this may sound like a question full of aggrandizement, but it's really about security—doing what I can to be sure I'm continually hired at my online school. I'll be honest: I really need this part-time teaching gig. The money from it helps me out with expenses, as I live in a rather expensive city, even though I have a fairly well-paying, full-time job as an accountant. I put everything I can think of into teaching my students, and I want to be sure my supervisor notices the extra touches and efforts I do in my class. Any suggestions as to how I can make this happen?

Two items that are no big deal: that you teach part-time, as an adjunct, and that (it seems) your primary reason for teaching is the paycheck. Let me quickly add: the **ONLY** reason I say these are not important is because you give the impression you really go all out for your students—the #1 focus all teachers should have, of course. As for your question, three items to share: (1) Your supervisor is probably in your class more than you realize, and thus



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much more aware of most (if not all) you do. (2) Don't hesitate to drop a note to your supervisor, with the approach there are many small things you do in class to help your students, and ask for his or her input (a somewhat back door way of listing all that you do in class!). (3) If your school has opportunities for faculty presentations volunteer for one, and use your efforts in the classroom as a "Best Practices" approach. Do this, and you'll be known only as a great teacher—not a paycheck teacher!

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY TEACH THE INMATES IN A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

I teach for a correctional facility. My online program is an experimental one, as there are security problems with inmates having access to the Internet. The partnership with which I am associated is between a community college and a state prison. Many security features have been implemented to keep the program safe, and inmates participating in the program have not only been thoroughly vetted but are also aware that 5 additional years will immediately be added onto their sentences if they abuse the program (and they sign a document agreeing to this clause). With all this background history of the program my question is a simple one, yet one that really perplexes me, as I have much experience in my field (economics), but none teaching inmates: can you offer any suggestions as to how I can make this work?

I jumped on your question when I read it, as I have much experience in teaching inmates, including with some early online programs (all were eventually closed due to an item you mentioned: inmates' misuse of the Internet). Let me start by giving you the #1 guiding rule for all correctional educators: be friendly, but never be a friend to an inmate. Many—and I do mean many!—correctional educators have been burned by inmates using what the educators perceived as friendship only for the

inmates to get extra (read: not allowed) privileges and illegal goods. With that out of the way, do these:

- Continually remind inmates your efforts are all focused on helping them stay out of prison once released (exception—teaching lifers; in this case, talk about self-worth while incarcerated, and this, of course, can relate to all).
- Motivate them to improve, to do better, and use examples of successful folks who also had been incarcerated, but overcame this challenge to become successful.
- Always get the inmates involved by asking questions, asking for their input, asking for how they want to use their education (but never prying into why they are in prison—not only illegal but also an item that can immediately put an inmate on defense)—inmates don't need (and quickly get bored by) straight lectures.
- Never let their correspondence go unanswered or answered late—this may give the impression you are not all that interested in them. You want the inmates to feel they can depend on you. (NOTE: To protect yourself ALWAYS report any suspicious or unsavory correspondence from an inmate to your correctional faculty supervisor/liason.)
- In giving feedback make it as positive as possible, always pointing out one or two items that an inmate had correct or almost correct, and give a summary paragraph that is motivational and ties the assignment to a better life outside (if applicable, depending on the inmate's sentence—if known).
- Share bits and pieces from your life that relate to the course subject (but nothing too personal) to personalize you and, when possible, to use as examples for the course.

Having taught in 333 prisons I can assure you these tips work!

WEEDING OUT REAL FROM FAKE STUDENT EXCUSES

Errol, a major "thank you!" for all your online teaching tips; I don't know of any other column that reaches out to we who teach in the online trenches, asking how you can help us! It is really appreciated. Now, let me add another question for you, one revolving around a situation I know is quite common with online educators: student excuses for not turning in assignments on time or not being active in class. Dead grandmothers, hospital stays, homelessness, no Internet, abusive boyfriends, "life has been rough," spent the last couple of weeks in jail, just had a baby, overwhelmed at work, mother with (you name the illness!), and mourning a deceased dog are but a sampling of the excuses that show up in my e-mail on a fairly regular basis. I know that some are certainly legit, but is there any way to weed out the phony ones? Is there anything I can do to cut down on more made-up excuses?

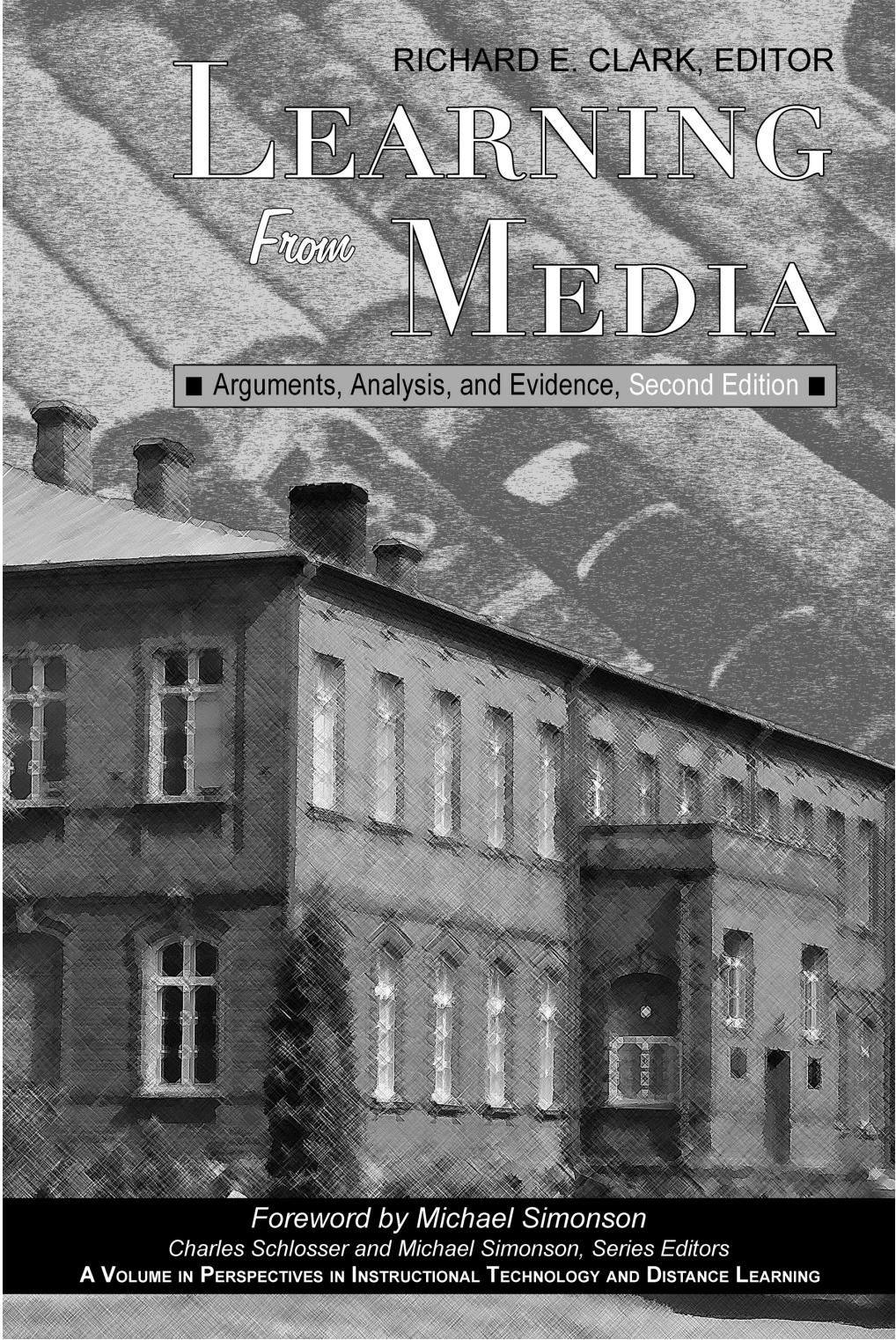
Well, that was quite the beginning to your letter! I appreciate what you said; this column had its birth due to the ongoing requests I was receiving from distance learning educators in the United States and abroad who had either been in one of my seminars or webinars focused on distance learning or read something I had written on the subject (and a large portion came from folks who read my other *Distance Learning* column, "Try This"). The comments like yours are what keep me writing this column—and knowing the importance of such a column: thanks!

Regarding your question, you are certainly correct: the number of excuses online educators receive from students—for missing assignments or not engaging in

discussion—is staggering. Interestingly, they are in much greater number than experienced by educators teaching in face-to-face classes, for two reasons: (1) With the ability to text or send emails or use other forms of social media it is far easier for a student to give an excuse than if the student had to do it in person; (2) Related to this: it is more inviting to offer an excuse to the "faceless and bodyless" online educator than facing "the professor" in person!

What to do? I don't know your school policy, but asking a student to provide proof of the excuse (especially if a grade is involved) is becoming more the norm in online education. Beyond this, asking the student for more details, especially in a phone call, can often result in a quick unmasking of fake from real. Also: keep track of your students and their related excuses—especially the same excuse—as this might give an indication as to who is creating excuses. (After all, one dead grandmother can happen, two is a possibility—but three?) But an important word of caution: never accuse a student of lying—not only is this simply not good teaching etiquette but also the student might be telling the truth. And if you do suspect a student is not telling the truth, and if accepting the excuse has an impact on a student's grade, relay this to the student's advisor (preferably forwarding the entirety of the student's correspondence), with a copy to your supervisor. These approaches will not weed out all falsehoods, to be sure, but they will definitely help!

Remember: Black coffee is an okay \$1 drink, but once helped along with cream, sugar, flavoring, syrup, frothing milk, and whipping cream expertly mixed by an experienced barista that coffee becomes worthy of its \$6 price tag.



RICHARD E. CLARK, EDITOR

LEARNING *From* MEDIA

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Foreword by Michael Simonson

Charles Schlosser and Michael Simonson, Series Editors

A VOLUME IN PERSPECTIVES IN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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And finally, we paraphrase Seneca who said, "The best ideas are common property."